

Public Lands Information Centers



Planning a Hiking Trip in Alaska

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Alaska's unlimited opportunities for day hikes and extended back-packing trips offer some of the most diverse and spectacular wild country anywhere. However, few developed trails exist, and Alaska's enormous size and lack of roads can make planning a difficult task. You may need to do considerable research initially, but your reward will be an unforgettable experience.



WHERE TO GO: Please study the enclosed brochures describing Alaska's state and federal recreation lands. Once you narrow your choice of areas, our office or the agency managing the area can offer you further assistance. Specify how much time you plan to spend, whether you plan to drive, boat, or fly to your destination, and how much wilderness camping experience you have. We can provide brochures, trail descriptions (if available), and information packets. You may want to get a good guidebook. Several are listed under "Additional References".

TRAILS: Developed trails exist near some of Alaska's larger cities and towns such as Fairbanks, Juneau, Anchorage, and Kenai, and most of these are accessible by road. There are extensive trails on the Kenai Peninsula and in Chugach State Park near Anchorage. You can expect more people sharing the backcountry with you on developed trails.

CROSS-COUNTRY TRAVEL: Most of Alaska's public recreation lands are true wilderness. Trails don't exist, and you must chart your own course using topographic maps and compass. Vast areas of Alaska are wetlands; a mosaic of forest, marsh, muskeg, meandering rivers, and thousands of lakes and ponds. The best hiking areas are on ridges and along the gravel bars of the larger rivers and streams, so you may want to focus your plans on alpine areas. However, alpine meadows that appear to offer easy hiking may actually be a mass of tussocks. These unwieldy clumps of vegetation surrounded by mud and water may be barriers to enjoyable foot travel. Swift rivers and streams are extremely cold, and crossing them is hazardous. Maintain a flexible schedule and be prepared to re-route your trip rather than risk a dangerous crossing. Remember, in a remote wilderness area you will be a long ways from help. You must be completely self-sufficient and responsible for your own safety!

ACCESS: The Dalton, Denali, Steese, and Taylor Highways lead to some outstanding hiking areas but are unpaved. If you rent a vehicle, check the rental agency's policy regarding driving on unpaved roads. There is no public bus system for Alaska's highways, and there are only a few private shuttle businesses. The Alaska Railroad provides service from Seward and Whittier on the Kenai Peninsula to Fairbanks in the interior. The Alaska Marine Highway (ferry system) serves Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, Kodiak Island, and the Alaska Peninsula. For remote areas you may need to charter a boat or plane to reach your final destination.

Alaska Division of Tourism ♦ Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation ♦ Alaska Department of Fish and Game ♦ Bureau of Land Management ♦ National Park Service ♦ USDA Forest Service ♦ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ♦ U.S. Geological Survey

PUBLIC USE CABINS: There are many public use cabins in Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, and the Kenai Peninsula. They are accessible by boat, floatplane, or trail. Other public cabins are located on Kodiak and Shuyak Island, Nancy Lakes State Recreation Area near Anchorage, and the Chena River and White Mountains areas near Fairbanks. Most of the Fairbanks area cabins are designed for winter use and are difficult to reach in summer. Kenai Fjords and Wrangell St. Elias National Parks have several public cabins. For more information, ask for our handout on public cabins.

MINIMUM IMPACT CAMPING: Arctic and alpine vegetation is slow-growing and extremely susceptible to damage, even from short-term camping. Avoid fires in such areas and use a backpacking stove. Read all minimum-impact materials provided: leave a clean camp and pack out or burn all waste. Keep your distance from wildlife to avoid causing them stress and to avoid danger to yourself. If you want to see wildlife up close, use binoculars or a telephoto lens.

EQUIPMENT: Plan on bringing everything you need with you, as there are few businesses that rent outdoor equipment. Be prepared for cold, wet weather. Take good quality raingear and warm clothes. Synthetic fleece and polypropylene clothes provide good protection, as they dry quickly and provide warmth even when wet. Make sure you have a sturdy tent with mosquito netting and a rain fly, a backpacking stove, first aid kit, emergency flares, insect repellent, sunscreen, and dark glasses.

GUIDES AND OUTFITTERS: Stumped by planning problems? You may want to go with a guide or outfitter. National Parks and some National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska provide listings of the guides/outfitters and air charter services with permits to operate in their areas. Check with local convention and visitors bureaus or the State Vacation Planner for additional listings.

SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS:

- **Bears:** Black and brown (grizzly) bears inhabit most of Alaska. Read all bear safety information provided, and follow the proper procedures for camping and hiking in bear country to reduce the chances of a confrontation. Firearms are not allowed in some parks. Check with the managing agency before you go. A red pepper-based aerosol spray that is highly effective in repelling bears is available in many sporting goods stores. (It should be enclosed in a sealed container or several layers of plastic bags during transport).
- **Weather:** Spring arrives in late May (later in Arctic and coastal areas) and autumn begins in late August. Weather conditions during this short season can include everything from temperatures of 90°F to week-long rainstorms. Snow can occur at any time at higher elevations. Fall colors are beautiful in September, but be prepared for rain, snow, and temperatures below freezing at night. Interior Alaska is generally warmer and drier than the rest of the state; coastal Alaska is rain country. Rivers and streams are generally at high water until late June, although rainstorms can cause local flooding at any time.
- **Insects:** Mosquito populations are highest in June and July and are followed in August and September by biting flies and gnats (no-see-ums). Insect repellent and a tent with mosquito netting (preferably gnat-proof as well) are essential. A headnet may prove useful. Choose a campsite on a ridge or on a riverside gravel bar where a breeze may bring relief from insects. If you are sensitive to bees or wasps bring appropriate medication.
- **Water:** Boil, filter, or chemically treat all water from lakes and streams before drinking. *Giardia*, an intestinal bacteria that can cause great discomfort, is widespread in Alaska. Glacial Rivers are full of silt which may clog filters. Let water sit overnight so the silt settles out, or filter it first through a clean handkerchief.

- **Maps:** Most public information brochures do not have enough detail to provide an accurate picture of your route. Get U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps (scale 1" = 1 mile or 1:63,360) and a compass, and know how to use them! (See "Additional References" for address). PLEASE NOTE: Topographic maps of Alaska are 10 to 40 years old. Trails, cabins, roads, and even some villages shown on maps may no longer exist. Check with the land managing agency if you have any questions.
- **Private Land:** Much of Alaska's backcountry contains mining claims and private lands, including Alaska Native corporation and village lands, and you may not be welcome. For permission to camp on Native-owned lands contact the village council. The *Alaska Wilderness Guide* and *Adventuring in Alaska* have addresses (see "Additional References").
- **Permits:** Permits for campfires or backcountry hiking are not required in most public lands units in Alaska, however, check in advance with the land managing agency. Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park (Chilkoot Trail) and Denali National Park require backcountry permits. Contact us for more information on these areas.
- **Trip Plan:** File a "trip plan" with a friend or the agency managing the area that you plan to visit, and let them know when you get back! Allow extra time for bad weather and take extra food in case you are delayed.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES: The Alaska Public Lands Information Center carries brochures and handouts on state and national parks, forests, refuges, and recreation areas in Alaska. The Center also has information on planning river trips, chartering aircraft, bear safety, minimum-impact camping, treating drinking water, water safety, and hypothermia. Center staff can help you plan your trip.

Books:

- Alaska Wilderness Guide. Alaska Northwest Books, Seattle, WA. (Updated every two years, and contains addresses of village councils).
- Adventuring in Alaska. Peggy Wayburn, 1988. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, CA.
- Alaska's Parklands. Nancy Lnage Simmerman, 1991. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
- 55 Hikes to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska. H. Nienhueser and N. Simmerman, 1985. the Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
- Discover Southeast Alaska with Pack & Paddle. Margaret Piggott. 1974. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
- Hiking Alaska. Dean Littlepage, 1997. Falcon Press Publishing Co., Inc., Helena and Billings, MT.

Topographic maps:

- USGS Map Distribution, Box 25286, Denver, CO 80225. Phone toll free: 1-800-USA-MAPS
- Earth Science Information Center Map Office, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK 99709. Phone: (907) 474-6960. E-mail: Maps@geewiz.gi.alaska.edu.
- Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer. 1998. Delorme Mapping, Freeport, ME. www.delorme.com.